

# One Year After RIO+20: Is Sustainable Development on Track In India?

Written by P.K. Gautam

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P.K. GAUTAM, JUL 4 2013

*The scientific debates, which are crucial for understanding problems of global commons, differ from many of the debates — in that they do not follow the familiar perspective on international relations (IR). There is no realist or liberal position on whether the earth is warming and why.*

– Keith L. Shimko[1]

At the international level, the debate on sustainable development (SD) has reached a plateau of complexity. A number of reports and articles have appeared since 1970s that cover issues related to sustainable development including the UNDP's *Human Development Reports*, The World Bank's *World Development Report* and numerous other studies. Besides, in various forums of the UN and other organizations, as a ritual, sustainable development finds its place during debates and discussions. The United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDG) is one such forum. Taking a long-term academic perspective it appears that the concept of SD now finds mention in almost all policy documents and plans of the UN as well as the majority of 'responsible' countries across the globe. The focus of the present discussion is at the level of the UN and it argues that the UN's role is rhetorical to a great extent. There is very little concrete or substance to showcase and thus the exercise on SD is still largely hollow. India, an emerging nation with increasing energy needs, has been taken as a case in point to discuss various economic, social and political reasons that derail efforts to achieve sustainable development.

### The UN and Sustainable Development

The UN is now taken as a yardstick for raising global concerns:

I. The UN's High level Panel on Global Sustainability: *Resilient People Resilient Planet* (January 2012) report states that by 2030:

- a) For a population of nine billion, the world may need 50 per cent more food, 45 per cent more energy and 30 per cent more water.
- b) It stresses the need for a new political economy.
- c) It emphasises the eradication of poverty, the reduction of inequality, inclusive growth, and sustainable production and consumption.
- d) It reconfirms a new nexus between food, water and energy.

II. At the Global Environmental Outlook (GEO)-5, prior to the Rio plus 20 conference of June 2012, the UN Under-Secretary General and UNEP Executive Director Achim Steiner warned: "If current trends continue, if current patterns of production and consumption of natural resources prevail and cannot be reversed and 'decoupled', then governments will preside over unprecedented levels of damage and degradation."

The report also calls for a greater focus on policies that target the drivers of environmental change – such as population growth and urbanization, unsustainable consumption patterns, fossil fuel-based energy consumption and transport, and globalization.

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*The Future We Want* (a document after the Rio plus 20 Conference on Sustainable Development, 20-22 June 2012) reiterates the same discourse as 1992. It articulates commitment to sustainable development and to ensuring the promotion of economically, socially and environmentally sustainable future for our planet and for the present and future generations. The only thing that was added in 2012 was the concept of the “Green Economy” to reduce the impact of the Brown Economy model of growth worldwide.

The Green Economy model is portrayed as an opportunity to enhance ecosystem services, and enable growth and sustainable livelihoods for the poor. But, this well-intended vision is without a design to enable green investments to reduce carbon intensities and a framework for creating global Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES) market opportunities without jeopardising the basic right to livelihood. The 2012 report reveals a total disjoint between a vision and the operational feasibility of a Green Economy.[2]

While the theoretical work by the UN is welcome, states continue to behave differently. The good news is that ideas churned by various agencies of the UN are now reaching the public as well as getting their rightful place in the academic discourse. If public opinion and party manifestos start giving priority to issues of SD within the states, it would mean a paradigm shift.

For that to happen in many countries, such as India, it will take more time as poverty does not provide the luxury of talking about SD and environmental security in election rallies. This is along expected lines. Unlike the rich, poor people have to struggle and survive. The rich and economically developed countries have greater resilience to adapt to changes. They also have the tools of the market like insurance to protect themselves and a resilient economy to absorb the shocks. The poor are impacted much more adversely by disasters such as floods and droughts (forced adaptation). This fundamental issue is generally overlooked by the international level negotiations.

## Financial Flows for Environmental Response

In terms of financial flows in the environmental arena, the diffuse and complex nature of the SD discourse is the biggest roadblock in perceiving what is being spent on SD type of activities of which the environment is the central focus. Some of the data have been reflected below[3]:

- Figures vary due to double counting and differing financial years. 85% of World Bank's environmental and resource management (ENRM) projects are managed by non- environmental sectors in the bank.
- UNEP report of 2011: ENRM and GEF in 2008 US \$ 3 billion, UNDP expenditure in 2009 US \$ 1.1 billion, Total UNEP budget in 2010 US \$ 0.5 billion.

Double counting, different financial years and different UN agencies make the picture very hazy. No clear cut idea or data can be obtained in complete monetary terms. Most of the advanced economies make many promises but do not deliver in financial terms. For example the Green Climate Fund (GCF), a fund within the framework of the UNFCCC, was founded as a mechanism to transfer money from the developed to the developing world, in order to assist developing countries in adaptation and mitigation practices to counter climate change. The Green Climate Fund will support projects, programmes, policies and other activities in developing country Parties using thematic funding windows. Its goal is to raise \$100 billion a year by 2020. To kick-start environmental projects, a Fast Start Funding of the GCF was agreed, encompassing \$30 billion for the period 2010-2012. The reality is quite dismal and this was revealed when the BASIC countries (Brazil, South Africa, India and China) pointed out that only US \$ 7 billion was available as on February 2013.

## Actions in India on Climate Change and Sustainable Development

On 30 June 2008, India announced and launched its National Action Plan on Climate Change (NAPCC). The NAPCC, guided by the principles of sustainable development (SD), attempts to align environmental and economic objectives.

In recent years, the government has rightly recognised the energy security concerns of the nation and placed more

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importance on energy independence. Various initiatives have been taken towards establishing energy efficient technologies, energy conservation measures and regulatory frameworks, while diversifying energy sources to meet national goals as well as simultaneously address climate change concerns.

The reduced energy intensity of the Indian economy since 2004 has been marked by an economic growth rate of over 9% per annum, which has been achieved with an energy growth of less than 4% per annum. This reduced energy intensity, at the relatively low level of India's per-capita GDP, has been made possible by a range of factors, including India's historically sustainable patterns of consumption, enhanced competitiveness, proactive policies to promote energy efficiency, and more recently, the use of the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) to accelerate the adoption of clean energy technologies.[4]

Policy makers in the ensuing 12<sup>th</sup> Five year plan have identified four critical challenges. All four are linked to sustainable development – a) managing energy situation, b) managing the water economy, c) addressing the problems posed by urban transformation that is likely to occur, and 4) ensuring the protection of the environment in a manner that can facilitate rapid growth.[5]

## **Change in Public Behaviour**

Mahatma Gandhi famously said that the world has enough on earth for everybody's needs but not enough for everybody's greed. The resources required to satisfy the growing demand for consumption may not be available. One trend that has been observed worldwide is run-away consumerist behaviour which may not be sustainable for the massive population of developing countries that are now slowly breaking the chains of poverty.

A survey in Bhutan on Gross National Happiness (GNH) says: "The belief that glorifies exotic poor people leading simple life as happy is not always true in the same way that more affluence does not translate into happiness." For the young (the population of youth is skyrocketing in most developing countries) living in Thimphu (capital city) with some stress seems preferable than living in a village because of availability of employment opportunities, facilities like education, hospitals, and a sense of freedom in the city.

The advanced industrialized economies that have much greater material footprint are unlikely to reduce their material intensity. It is said that their way of life is not negotiable. This is clear by the behaviour of some in the climate change negotiations. Because of their consumerist national interest the US never ratified the Kyoto Protocol and now Canada, Japan, and Russia are reluctant to take on any commitments to reduce emissions for mitigation. At the same time developing countries such as Bhutan which were considered to function on the basis of Buddhist ideas such as frugality and simplicity are now under the tight grip of the modernisation theory. This theory suggests that all countries will gradually move up an escalator towards 'development.' According to this theory, developing countries would strive to imitate the west and thereby not only industrialise, rather become more western in social, political, cultural, even familial realms of behaviour.

How can this deadlock be resolved? The real issue is to revisit development and to get rid of the negative manifestations of the modernisation theory. Here possibly the only thing ancient civilizations can give back to humankind is their capacity to live within reasonable material means without worshipping poverty. This will be an important contribution to SD by developing countries.

## **Is the Future Bleak?**

The SD agenda from this brief overview is surely on track but it has got messier and complex. It has meandered into many forks in the road and has become a cobweb of ideas and data. We can know a thing only if we can measure it. How does one measure environmental degradation, the gold standard of positive or negative SD? Economists, by and large, do not study the workings of the actual economic system. They theorize about it. As Ely Devons, an English economist once said at a meeting, "If economists wished to study the horse, they wouldn't go and look at horses. They'd sit in their studies and say to themselves – 'What would I do if I were a horse?'"[6] This quote explains the need to take ecological experience and traditional ecological knowledge of society and grassroots understanding

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of the situation. SD cannot be measured and implemented sitting in libraries and air-conditioned ivory towers and offices. Yet a lot will remain unperceived and therefore inferred. Of this uncertainty we all are aware.

## Conclusion

The idea of SD might be rhetorical and there might be very little substance for the UN or other agencies among the international community to showcase. But can we lose hope? A few excellent UN reports and documents have been listed in this piece. These reports cover a wholesome theoretical work and we are not short of concepts and ideas. The only change that is required is focussed financial flows and developing countries taking on greater responsibility. In terms of societal change, greed has to give way to need. This is not only applicable for developed countries but also must be carefully nurtured in the way societal attitudes are changing for the worst in material terms in developing countries having rich civilizational values to fall upon.

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**P. K. Gautam** is a research fellow at IDSA with interest in non-traditional security, Tibet, military matters and indigenous historical knowledge of India.

[1] Keith L. Shimko, "The Global Common," Chapter 13, *International Relations: Perspectives, Controversies & Readings*, Wadsworth: Cengage Learning; 4<sup>th</sup> edition, 2012, p. 323.

[2] Gopal K Kadekodi, "Is a 'Green Economy' Possible?" , *Economic and Political Weekly* , Vol. XLVIII, No. 25, June 22, 2013, pp. 44-49.

[3] *GEO5: Global Environmental Outlook: Environment for the Future We Want*, UNEP, 2012, Box 17.2, p. 466.

[4] *India: Second National Communication to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change* , New Delhi, Ministry of Environment and Forests, Government of India, 2012, pp. iv-v. The report is also called NATCOM-II.

[5] Montek Singh Ahluwalia, "Prospects and Policy Challenges in the Twelfth Plan", *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. XLVI, No. 21, May 21, 2001, pp. 88-105.

[6] As quoted by Lloyd. I .Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph, *Explaining Indian Democracy: A Fifty-Year Perspective, 1956-2006*, *The Realm of Ideas*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 130.

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## About the author:

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